

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1BOSTON GLOBE
16 APRIL 1983

US considers altering plan in arms talks

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WASHINGTON - The Reagan Administration is considering placing a significantly revised strategic arms control proposal on the table when the Geneva negotiations with the Soviet Union resume on June 8, according to well-placed officials.

The revision, reflecting the recent recommendations of a bipartisan presidential commission on the MX missile, would drop any attempt to count missiles, and would instead concentrate on negotiating sharp reductions in the number of warheads and the overall missile payload in each side's strategic nuclear arsenal.

[Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany, talking to reporters after conferring with President Ronald Reagan, said he had urged the President to make "personal contacts with Yuri V. Andropov, the Soviet leader, because he believed Moscow had not locked the door on US nuclear arms proposals.

Officials say that even though Reagan has not yet formally endorsed the commission's recommendations, an interagency panel of senior officials from the State Department, the Pentagon, the CIA and the National Security Council is already weighing arms control alternatives.

The President is expected to announce on Tuesday his agreement with the commission's findings, stressing the interdependence of all three of its principal conclusions: that 100 ten-warhead MX missiles be deployed in existing Minuteman silos, that a small, single-warhead missile, capable of being deployed in mobile form, be developed, and that the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks proposal be modified to focus on warheads and payload, not missile launchers.

Some officials point out that since the small missile is not expected to be ready for testing for at

least three or four years, there is no urgency in revising the American START proposal - which calls for both sides to reduce to 850 missiles carrying no more than 5000 warheads.

Others, however, argue that since the President will endorse the Scowcroft panel's recommendations and since the case for proceeding with the MX missile would be strengthened by moving ahead with the START revisions, it makes sense not to delay implementing that proposal.

Proponents also note such a move would probably be popular in Western Europe, suggesting that the United States was seeking a strategic treaty at reduced warhead levels and offering greater stability in a crisis. This, in turn, should bolster the determination of the governments of West Germany, Britain and Italy - where antinuclear protesters seek to delay or prevent deployment of medium-range missiles - to proceed with initial installation in December if no arms control agreement covering such missiles is in sight by then.

Finally, they say that since both the United States and the Soviet Union will be compelled over the next decade to restructure their strategic forces because of the mounting vulnerability of missiles in silos, it makes sense to provide an arms control context to limit the size and cost of the nuclear deployments on each side.

It is understood that most officials involved in considering a shift in the START position favor sticking with the 5000-warhead proposal, while urging that total missile payload or throw-weight be reduced to less than two million kilograms. The Administration had intended to make a specific payload reduction proposal in the second phase of its START position.

The Soviets can be expected to object to such an approach, at least initially, because it would call for much greater reductions on their part. Russian land-based and submarine-based missiles with a total payload of 5.5 million kilograms carry about 7500 warheads. By contrast, US missiles with 2.1 million kilograms of throw-weight carry about 7200 warheads. Most Soviet missiles, warheads, guidance packages and other payload are much larger than comparable US systems.

However, Soviet military officials have recently conceded they expect their missile silos to become vulnerable to American missiles, such as the MX and the Trident 2. And they began test firing in February of a new, solid-fuel missile that is expected to be deployed on a mobile launcher, much like the medium-range SS20 missile.

Since it now appears the United States, too, will probably make a significant part of its ICBM force mobile, some planners say American negotiators should urge their Soviet counterparts to consider sizable reductions, phased over a long period of time as both sides restructure to more survivable forces.

After all, they point out, in the absence of agreed limits and constraints it is likely both would have to field much larger, costlier forces.